



Newsweek—Robert R. McElroy

Bryan: Good-conduct medal for a nonhero

N.G., P.S.

P.S. WILKINSON. By C.D.B. Bryan.
441 pages. Harper & Row. \$5.95.

Sad to say, literary prizes—like children's camp trophies, assorted annual awards, and good-conduct medals—are more often expressions of the benefactor's goodwill and fond hopes than of the benefited's singular merit.

Even some of the most famous prizes, national and international, are by now largely discredited; and, reluctantly, one has come to suspect that publishers' prizes for novels are little more than promotion and marketing devices. Remainder tables—the limbo of the unsuccessful—are constantly filled with the ruins of those great expectations. True to form, the 1965 Harper Prize Novel, "P.S. Wilkinson," is by all standards of judgment simply a bad book.

Everything that is wrong with it follows from the sin which no novel can survive: a protagonist who is a continuous, unremitting bore. Given a thick book to roam about in, P.S. (Bryan takes an awful risk in naming his hero that; the startled reader keeps looking for the epistle above the postscript) seems constitutionally incapable of a

fresh observation or lively perception.

He is a self-righteous prig—an insufferable whiner and self-pitier forever reminding the world of the martyrdom he has suffered in serving some time with the peacetime army in Korea. The 28-year-old Bryan and his hero keep discovering ancient truisms as if they were revelations of blinding originality: the timidity, and stupidity, and hypocrisy of institutions; the fact that some military officers are martinets and frauds; the difficulties the young have in Finding Themselves and Knowing What They Want; the Pain of Life and the Tears of Disillusionment. It is impossible to care about P.S.'s travails because it is impossible to become interested in him, in his routine problems, and in the terribly dull people whom he encounters in his listless journey. A witty friend of his—his best, his *only* friend—cracks at one point: "I wouldn't miss this for all the tea in Lipton's." No wonder P.S. is a sad young man.

Prying: The trouble is he is also a posturing and attitudinizing one, and we are asked to believe that he is in some special way a heroic one. He arrives at the bold conclusion that it was not really nice of the U.S. Government to support Syngman Rhee, and he thinks there is something deplorable about his commanding officer's ordering the shaving of Korean whores' heads while retaining the services of his own personal Korean whore. Then P.S. daringly decides that the CIA isn't all it's cracked up to be, what with the Bay of Pigs and its prying into job applicants' sex lives with the aid of lie detectors.

All this would not be quite so bad if it were not that the banality of the writing is fully equal to the suffocating banality of idea and sentiment. Tor-

Army Reserve, P.S. reflects, in a passage meant to convey his anguish: "He didn't know how to explain it, really. But he felt it was just one more *institution*, just one more big sheltering all-embracing womb that he wanted out of." Hastening to a reunion with his long-lost love—surely one of the exciting moments in a man's life—here is P.S. trembling with expectant emotion: "On the flight to Washington he thought about how good it would be to see Hilary again." He ponders the most momentous fact of our time: "P.S. lit a cigarette and tried to imagine the destruction caused by a bomb six thousand times more powerful than the one dropped at Hiroshima. It was incredible. There was no way to imagine it. I was so enormous that he couldn't even be scared by it."

Magnetism: In a towering rage at human callousness, he exclaims: "Well you can be goddam sure I care. I don't like it at all. *Not one bit!*" And here he expresses his sense of the immense personal magnetism of President Kennedy: "He thought of the many times he had watched the President on television, and how he had been proud of the way the President answered questions, proud of the way he looked, intrigued by the man as well as the office he represented."

When, at the end, P.S. seems to have decided to enter the Foreign Service, the reader thinks prayerfully: "God save this Republic!"